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Reaching In, Reaching Out: A Tale of Administrative Experimentation and the Process of Administrative Inclusion

[Spring 2010 / Focus](#)

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Administration in writing centers



Kelli M. Prejean

Introduction

Universities often have a variety of academic programs and initiatives dedicated to the goal of helping students achieve effective communication skills, but these programs and initiatives can change quickly during different moments of institutional and administrative shifts. Our writing center at a mid-size, four-year institution serves as a primary support program for enhancing students' literacy in writing and critical thinking, so when our administrators and faculty engage in conversations concerning retention, general education reform, and writing in the disciplines, the writing center becomes a central component in supporting students through these curricular changes. To that end, the administrative goals involved in writing center work may change or evolve frequently and quickly as the university community seeks to enhance the educational experience of our students. The question becomes how do writing centers "survive" in the ever-changing tides of university administration and curriculum reform? And how do these changes present opportunities for tutors to acquire leadership skills transferable to contexts outside of the writing center?

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The answer, I believe, is by creating a flexible and inclusive administrative

structure, which provides opportunities for tutors to invest themselves more deeply in their tutoring work and to offer their creative energies to administrative tasks. In other words, involving tutors in the administrative operations of a writing center creates an opportune context for tutors to see themselves as professionals within a discipline and to engage in writing center work in more meaningful ways than they might if they only see tutoring as a part-time job or part of their program requirements. Involving tutors in administration also fosters community and enhances the relationship between the director and her tutors. Such benefits for new professionals have been documented in writing center research, most notably by Julie Eckerle, Karen Rowan, and Shevaun Watson, who have written extensively on graduate administrators and the various effects administrative work has on graduate students' professionalization, and whose work has provided a context through which I examine my own experiences as a writing center administrator faced with the challenge of creating professionalization opportunities for writing tutors. I offer here a self-reflective look at administrative experimentation in the face of various institutional and personal challenges and at how these challenges moved our center toward the goal of administrative plurality and a shared sense of professional identity.

The Writing Center and Administrative Evolutions

The **Marshall University Writing Center** is currently housed in the English Department and funded through the College of Liberal Arts. We have approximately seventeen tutors on staff each academic year. Most tutors are English graduate teaching assistants who tutor in the writing center as part of their preparation to teach composition. In addition, approximately five-to-six upper-division undergraduates are hired each year to provide more interdisciplinary expertise to our staff.

Since my hiring in 2005, I have witnessed many administrative and institutional changes. When I began, Marshall had just hired a new president, whose hiring came at the end of years of interim presidents. I have worked for three Deans of the College of Liberal Arts, each with varying degrees of interest in the writing center, and I have had three Department Chairs. With each administrative shift comes some trepidation about what will become of the writing center or how my job might change as we meet the demands of new programmatic goals. In addition to these administrative changes, Marshall has worked for nearly three years on general education reform, with discussions and plans surrounding these reforms often involving the writing center but never in a clear or consistent way. For example, at the indirect request of our new President, I met with the Chair of the Communications Department to think about how the writing center might join forces with Communications to create a speech and writing center. Our new Dean shifted this move, however, and instead pushed for collaboration with the library to create a Learning Commons model. Our writing center has recently moved into the library to fulfill this goal.

A Tale of Two Administrative Models

This context is typical perhaps when new administration steps in, but it is an important reminder that writing center program goals are often affected by the changing tides of upper-level administration and curriculum reform, among many other types of "reform" or programmatic changes at an institution like Marshall. It has been difficult, especially as a new faculty member, to make

sense of some of these changes and to ensure that the writing center remains a key player in any re-visioning of curriculum and programmatic changes, while also upholding the mission of our writing center work, which is to create a safe space for students to share their writing and ideas as well as a site for tutors to gain meaningful professional experience as teachers of writing.

To add to the work of translating these larger university reforms into the daily operations of the writing center, I admit that I did not use my directorship wisely and initially failed to create meaningful roles for tutors within the center's administrative framework. Perhaps my status as an untenured faculty member influenced my decision to take on most administrative challenges on my own, feeling the push—as most new faculty members do—to prove myself and to take on what was, realistically, too much for one person to handle. Besides the resulting fatigue, the burden I was putting on myself caused me to overlook one of the best resources available to me: my tutors.

I had to begin seeing our writing center community as just that—a community—and I had to recognize that I needed to work with tutors as part of a team.

In retrospect, turning to tutors for administrative help should not have been so foreign to me. I have helped with administrative tasks since my earliest days as a graduate student, serving as a co-administrator in various writing and tutoring programs, including a position as Assistant Director of the writing center while working on my doctorate in Rhetoric and Composition at the [University of Louisville](#). While there, I also served as Assistant Director of the Writing Centers Research Project and was a graduate co-chair of the Thomas R. Watson Conference. As a graduate administrator, I was often assigned important tasks including training new tutors, managing schedules, and working on outreach, among other things. As the director of Marshall's Writing Center, I did turn to this assistant director model and utilized a full-time graduate assistant funded through our Distributed Education program to serve as my Assistant Director. I used this administrative model of Director/Assistant Director for four years and was grateful to have a "side-kick"—someone who offered consistency and whose time in the center was dedicated to administrative work and to helping me manage the center's daily operations. The downfall of this model, however, is that as a graduate student, the Assistant Director occupied a precarious position among peers—at once a graduate tutor like everyone else, but then also an administrator, someone in charge of facilitating smooth daily operations, which sometimes entailed the occasional reprimand of a fellow graduate tutor. Eckerle, Rowan, and Watson point out in their own research that administration for graduate students can often be "lonely" and "awkward" because graduate administrators occupy a difficult space between faculty and their graduate peers ("When the Administrator is a Graduate Student" IV. 8.2). While I enjoyed the model of Director/Assistant Director and the personal benefits it offered to my work, I had to admit that the model invited some problems, and I knew that "total buy-in" (to use administrative-speak) would only come if all tutors became a part of the center's administration. And given that all of the tutors would be affected by any change in our program's unit or governance, I realized that a change in administrative structure within the writing center was needed in order to invite the input of those who know writing center work best and whose efforts greatly define our center's identity: our tutors.

But let me inject here to say that coordinating administrative projects among tutors seemed difficult and challenging unto itself, and I was also concerned about how extra projects might impose on tutors, even though I was of course allowing time during their shifts to work on such tasks. I perceived administration as an easier task if done mostly alone. All of this changed, however, when I gave birth to my first child in the fall 2008. I simply had no choice but to rely on tutors to help me, and truthfully, I quickly realized that asking for their input and their energies was not a sign of weakness. I had to begin seeing our writing center community as just that—a community—and I had to recognize that I needed to work with tutors as part of a team. What resulted was that tutors quickly began taking on leadership roles in the writing center and seeing administrative work as an important step toward becoming professionals as teachers and scholars. And they began to see our writing center as part of a larger community of writing centers and started to help generate ideas for making our writing center more effective.

Embracing Administrative Plurality: Win-win for All

Within the model of administrative plurality, the writing center operates using a framework of shared responsibility, wherein everyone participates in the center's success and in making the necessary changes required when programmatic and institutional shifts take place. This kind of pluralistic model is beneficial in many ways, but in particular, it has accomplished both the goals of professionalizing tutors and providing stability in ways I could not have predicted. For example, tutors' job descriptions now include administrative responsibilities, from opening and closing the center to initiating administrative projects such as writing workshops. Acknowledging their administrative responsibilities and expanding the definition of their work from the start creates the expectation that tutors, as part of their jobs, invest themselves professionally in ways they might not if they just see themselves as tutors, which is not to undermine the importance of actual tutoring but to define their work with students as part of a larger programmatic mission and to see this professional experience as applicable to positions they may hold in the future. Tutors gain expertise in areas such as scheduling, program development, outreach, public speaking, and higher education funding and governance—all skills that are transferable to jobs or advanced degree programs once they leave Marshall. In addition to the professionalization component the administrative plurality model affords, establishing an administrative framework within which all tutors participate does not rely as heavily on funding for a single administrative assistant. Our current President cut nearly all graduate assistantships not tied directly to classroom teaching, so funding for a graduate Assistant Director is now out of the question, and I must rely on all of the tutors—most of whom are teaching assistants funded through the English Department—to help with the duties I would have assigned to one Assistant Director. While directors should continue to fight for more institutional support, there is much to gain from the peace of mind that comes with building a sustainable administrative structure not dependent on unstable funding.

Ideas for a Flexible Approach

As Director, I still find it difficult to create and maintain a consistent and meaningful structure for administrative opportunities and to manage the heavy teaching load (3-3) I have in addition to my directorship. The writing center will not have a formal training course built into my teaching load until fall 2010, so I have relied on pre-semester training workshops, impromptu staff meetings, and

our staff listserv to establish a sense of shared responsibility and purpose. As Eckerle, Rowan, and Watson reflect in their research, "From Graduate Student to Writing Administrator," "Even the best ideas for solidifying the training process [...] can become a burden for an already overburdened work force" (231). Fortunately, most tutors work in the writing center for at least two years, so I have been able to cultivate professional commitment simply by working closely with tutors in and out of the writing center and by involving them in decision-making (even via email). Through our communication and collaborative decision-making, we build a sense of mutual respect for writing center work, so the day-to-day tasks become not only about our individual jobs but how we work together to problem-solve and to build a better program for students.

As a team with shared administrative responsibilities, we have accomplished more in the last year than we ever did using the Director/Assistant Director model.

More specifically, our center's tutors now share in administrative responsibilities through their roles in writing center teams. Each second-year TA is a team leader and has a team of two or three other tutors. Team leaders help with scheduling, managing tutors' leave requests, mentoring new tutors, and helping to develop project ideas for their team. Each team works on a writing center-related project for the semester or academic year, depending on the scope of the project. Some of their projects include developing workshops and other outreach initiatives, working on publicity for the writing center, using new technologies to expand access to writing center information, and drafting writing center policies and mission statements. No matter how tutors go about accomplishing these tasks, they work as a team and often go above and beyond what is expected. Last year, tutors created a GRE and MCAT writing workshop that has become such a huge success on campus that upper-level administrators and students have requested the workshop every semester since. Tutors have also turned to online social networks such as Facebook to reach out to students on campus, therefore using their technological expertise and a common cultural phenomenon to create an online community of writing center supporters. All of these projects would have never been accomplished through the sole use of my own time and knowledge. Further, when tutors invest themselves in such ways, they own what the writing center becomes to them and the larger university community, and they not only acquire technical skills and subject expertise, but they learn how to lead, delegate, and work as a team, all skills invaluable to life outside of our immediate educational context. Essentially, this work translates into tutor-initiated program development; changes are not top-down, from the director to tutors. The ownership tutors acquire comes from them learning how to identify a need and figuring out ways to fulfill that need, from offering ideas about physical space to creating written procedures for helping the writing center function more effectively now and in the future.

As a team with shared administrative responsibilities, we have accomplished more in the last year than we ever did using the Director/Assistant Director model. I can feel confident now that all tutors know they are an important part of the center and that no matter what challenges and changes we face, our administrative structure now allows for greater flexibility and is directed by the center's ever-changing goals rather than a rigid administrative model that accomplishes far less than we can as a whole.

We still face many changes ahead. Our role in the Learning Commons plan is still in flux, both in terms of physical space provided by the library and the continued autonomy the writing center currently enjoys. This means that our programmatic identity is still unstable—as it has been since I became director—but I feel more certain that we can handle these changes with a shared sense of purpose and commitment and that I can continue to provide professionalization for tutors. In fact, I have come to see institutional and programmatic changes as perfect opportunities for tutors to reflect on their writing center work and to help them understand the external forces that govern—for better or worse—the evolution of our professional lives, both in and out of the academy.

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